

## The Grand Delusion by mugsandpugs

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**Summary:**

“Don’t. Just don’t. Don’t tell me you’re going to be here forever, or that you’ll give up drinking and smoking and popping pills for us, because you won’t. And I’m not asking you to. But if you ever hit my mom or my brother, I will kill you.”

He could have pointed out that it wasn’t the best idea for a kid who already had a record for fighting to start threatening a cop, but he didn’t. Tonight was a night for truths. “If I ever do something like that, I’ll buy you the ropes to use for my noose.”

# The Grand Delusion

## Author's Note:

January 2019 note: I wrote this story over a year ago, but deleted it from my ao3 for Reasons. I've decided to put it back up. I can't promise it will stay up, so if you want to download it, the download button is (like all fics) in the top right corner.

**"The cats have nuzzled down with their kittens,  
The lambs have laid down with the sheep.  
You're cozy and warm in your bed, my dear;  
Please, go the fuck to sleep."**

**- From 'Go the Fuck to Sleep' by Andrew Mansbach**

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Hopper should have turned right around and walked out the door the first time the thought crossed his mind.

The problem was that the thoughts weren't even concrete enough to be referred to as such, not yet.

He'd been around the block enough to know that this thing with Joyce- if he allowed it to become a thing- was far from casual. He'd liked her in high school; he liked her now. If he tended the garden- cleared out the rocks, kept good maintenance of the weeds, watered and fertilized and all that jazz, maybe it could bloom into a something... and both of them could use a Something at this point in their lives.

And he adored the boy; little Will whom he'd personally pulled out from hell, whom he'd breathed for and manually pumped the heart of until he could once more do those things on his own. The thought of being a full-time dad for Will brought him a great warmth and a joy. Hopper had been born to be a father; he wanted little else out of life.

That just left Jonathan.

Oh, he held no delusions that he'd ever be a 'dad' for Jonathan. The boy was too old- just seventeen- and didn't seem to want nor need anything but what he already had: his mother and his brother. And that was fine; Hopper could respect that. He did his best not to intrude, while Jonathan did his best not to show how the presence of a fourth body at the breakfast table bothered him. They could cohabitate politely and do their best not to step on one another's toes.

Only, it was a very small house, and the resentment between them grew daily until it filled up every crevice of silence.

"It's my job to make breakfast," Jonathan mumbled, hair hanging in his eyes, the first time he woke to Hopper frying sausages at the oven.

"I figured you wanted to sleep in," Hopper replied just as calmly, poking at the fragrant, sizzling meat with a spatula.

"I don't," Jonathan said, and he wasn't deliberately being impertinent, but there was an irritation to his quiet voice just the same. "Want to. Ever."

Hopper could have pointed out that Jonathan had been working late hours at the lumberyard on a school night, that he couldn't have gotten more than five hours last night, that the bags under his eyes had bags of their own and he looked beat half to hell. He wisely swallowed that all down.

"Okay. Set the table, then."

Jonathan set the table.

The teenager's jaw clenched involuntarily the first time he came home to see Hopper sitting at that same table with Will, going through flash cards with him to help him study. Will was a bright boy who learned fast and paid rapt attention and- Hopper sensed it with that intuition that had carried him so far in his career- that boy wanted a father as much as Hopper wanted to be one. They got along like peanut butter and jelly.

“Hi, Jonathan!” Will smiled as his brother walked into the house; beaming radiantly at him. It was clear that the kid hero-worshipped his older brother. “Hopp’s grilling steak tonight!”

Jonathan tried to shove his jealousy away before it could be seen, piling it into the treasure chests that lined his mind. “That’s great,” he said, and his enthusiasm was appropriate enough that Will couldn’t see that it was not genuine. He just grinned toothily and turned his attention back to studying as Jonathan retreated to the safety den that was his bedroom and the Clash rumbled gently through the walls. (He didn’t come out until his brightly smiling mother called him for dinner.)

Jonathan washed the dishes after dinner- quickly, efficiently, and by hand- and he shooed away anyone who tried to help him.

“I think he’s feeling a little replaced,” Joyce said quietly, after he once again retreated to his room. “He’s used to carrying half the weight of this household on his shoulders, and doesn’t know what to do with only a third of the responsibility now.”

Hopp had been thinking something of the same- but he started thinking a little less as Will was sent to bed to dream of his dungeons and dragons, and then he and Joyce sent themselves to bed to think of other things entirely. (Every time the mattress squeaked, every time Joyce whispered a quiet “shh” and pressed her fingers to his lips, he could only hope Jonathan was too involved in his music to hear.)

It took three orgasms- hers- and one – his- until she was sated, growing sloppier and sloppier every time she pulled at his hair and spread her thighs further apart to accommodate his nose and tongue. She was small and beautiful, and he longed to spirit her away to his own home and have his wicked and uninhibited way with her until dawn broke. But after she’d stroked him to completion, he instead suggested she get some sleep.

“We both have work tomorrow, J,” he whispered, kissing at her throat, and held her until her breathing grew smooth. Only then did he say the risky words that had been lingering in his mind for days: “I think I could love you.”

Saying that while she was awake would have complicated matters too much. Either he loved her-and therefore, told her- or he didn't, and then he wouldn't.

He slipped out of bed and into his jeans, feeling too hot, and went to the balcony to have a cigarette and maybe pop a Xanax or two (or three), liking the way the chill night air hardened his nipples and made his oxygen fog like dragon's breath. He wished he had some stiff bourbon to wash the Xanax down with, but he'd have to make another trip home for that.

A light in the kitchen caused him to turn around, and he saw Jonathan in the kitchen, weighing the half-full flower bag, sniffing the milk, and scribbling something into a notepad on the counter as he did so. Hopper frowned and squinted at the clock above the range-it was half past three.

"What are you doing up?" he asked, letting himself back in the house, and Jonathan jumped, holding his notebook to his chest like he was afraid Hopper might take it from him.

"Nothing. Just. Inventory." He'd been halfway through checking the bag of dry beans, and Hopper understood. Poverty often lead to obsession over food. How many sleepless nights had Jonathan spent checking the food again and again, calculating how long they could make it last until the next paycheck arrived?

"You don't have to worry so much anymore, kid," Hopper said, loose and relaxed from the sex and the cigarette and the drugs. "I get paid enough to-"

"Yeah, well don't expect me to rely on that," Jonathan said, more sharply than anything Hopper had heard him say since his brother had returned. "You think you're the first guy mom's dated that thinks he can fix all our problems?"

Hopp blinked. As far as he was aware, Joyce Byers was too busy working and raising two sons on her own to do much dating around at all. Not that this new knowledge changed anything; she could have banged every man and woman in Hawkins and it wouldn't make him want her less.

"I don't think I can fix all your problems," he found himself saying as the boy got on his knees in the pantry, reaching in the very back to haul forward another bag of flour. "I can't even fix my own. But I do think I can help."

"That's awfully fucking generous of you."

It wasn't the profanity that bothered Hopper. It was the spiteful, vitriolic tone. Jonathan was beyond pissed at him- and for what?

"Jonathan, I think we should talk."

The teen's back stiffened from inside the pantry, and Hopper watched as he slowly extricated himself from it, stood, dusted off the knees of his sweatpants. He still couldn't meet Hopper's eyes, but still he radiated hostility.

"Fine. Let's talk."

He lead the way back outside, and Hopp followed, both males understanding the value of not holding a negative conversation in the heart of the house where Joyce or Will could wake at any time and overhear.

Jonathan leaned his back against the porch railing, and just looking at him, Hopp saw the man he would one day be, all the things he admired about him. Resolute and steadfast, strong and bright. Jonathan was a hard worker, a deep thinker, and wasn't afraid to walk his own path. Hopp genuinely liked the kid, even, which made this ruffling of fur all the stranger.

"Jonathan," Hopp said, standing across from him. "You've got to tell me what's wrong. Because if we're butting heads all the time, that creates a bad environment for Will to grow up in."

It was cheap shot, using Will to make Jonathan open up. Hopp consoled himself with the fact that, just because it was cheap, didn't make it any less true. Sooner or later Will would eventually notice that the most predominant men in his life were at odds... And might feel obligated to choose sides.

Jonathan shifted at the mention of his brother's name. Carefully, he

straightened his shoulders, pushed his hair from his face, and turned his round, dark eyes- the same eyes he shared with his mother and his brother- onto Hopp. It was a shame he hid them away so much; he was actually quite a good-looking boy under that mane.

“I think you’re screwing with her,” Jonathan said, fearless despite the large and strong cop he was chastising. There was no need to clarify which ‘her’ he meant. “Everyone knows you’re a sleazebag, Hopper; you’ll do anything in a skirt that gives you the time of day. And on top of that, you’re a drunk. You’re already getting fidgety because you haven’t had a shot of anything hard in about two days.”

Well, fuck. So Hopp was a creature of vice; that didn’t make him a bad *person*...

“You know who else drank and fucked around?”

... Oh.

“Lonnie,” Hopp said quietly. “Listen, kid, I’m not-“

“Don’t,” Jonathan interrupted. “Just don’t. Don’t tell me you’re going to be here forever, or you’ll give up drinking and smoking and popping pills for us, because you won’t. And I’m not asking you to. But if you ever hit my mom or my brother, I will kill you.”

This conversation had abruptly gone in a direction Hopper hadn’t anticipated. He thought it over, pulling his lips back into his mouth as he so often did when he was puzzled. It sounded an awful lot like Jonathan was implying more about his father- things Hopper suspected, but had never heard confirmed. Did the man hit his wife and kids? Hopper wouldn’t be surprised.

He could have pointed out that it wasn’t the best idea for a kid who already had a record for fighting to start threatening a cop, but he didn’t. Tonight was a night for truths. “If I ever do something like that, I’ll give you the rope to use for my noose.”

Jonathan studied his face from the light of the stars and a faraway streetlight, and Hopper let him look his fill. At last Jonathan sat back, averting his gaze once more. He’d said his piece, and he was satisfied

with the answer he'd gotten. Maybe things could return to fairly neutral ground between them once more. Hopper should have let it go at that, but-

"I care about you, Jonathan. I know I'm not so good about sharing 'feelings' and all that, but I do. I care about you and your family. Haven't I earned at least a little trust?"

He wasn't asking for cookies or a thank you note, but he had, after all, risked life and limb, gone to hell and back to pull Will out of the Upsidown. He'd do it again, he'd do it a hundred times; not to prove anything, but because Will deserved a chance to live a normal life.

Jonathan regarded him some more. It was a little unsettling, those eyes peeling him apart layer by layer. Hopp had the distinct feeling that the teen could see much more than he let on; could see every sin, every failing, every flaw of the cop. He finally had to talk again just to break the silence.

"Give me a chance, kid. Don't dismiss me right away. You got a problem with me, drag me outside just like this. Yell at me. Throw some punches. We can spar all night if you need." Hell, did Hopp ever know how it was to feel young and angry at the world. "But don't shut me out, please."

Maybe it was the please that did it. Jonathan angled his head, and his hair fell over his eyes once again. Hopp knew he shouldn't- they weren't there yet, might not ever be- but still he reached forward and brushed that hair back, tucking it behind an ear. Jonathan's skin felt soft on Hopp's work-calloused fingers, and he quickly dropped his hand back to his side, knowing he'd crossed a line.

Jonathan held still as a rabbit, processing their proximity and the words the chief had offered him. He knew he'd been being unfair, and much as he wanted to give into the teenage urge to hate and love and judge and condemn without thinking any more about it, his life experiences had made him wiser than that. He knew some things required longer to figure out.

"Okay," he finally agreed. "Okay. A chance. For Will."



He shifted towards the door, like he'd like to go back inside- Hopper noticed that he'd shivered in his ratty tank-top, though Hopp was still topless and relatively unbothered by the cold. He stopped him, though.

"Come on, kid; shake on it, like a man." He offered his hand.

Jonathan rolled his eyes, but shuffled closer once more, clumsily putting his own big artists' hand into Hopper's and giving it a loose shake. "Fine, fine." Already, he was looking a bit embarrassed about his own theatrics, so Hopp used his grip on his hand to drag him closer and ruffle his hair.

"Hey!" he sounded annoyed, but a half-grin quirked the corner of his mouth anyway, pawing at the hand that held him. Hopper returned the grin tenfold.

"Go the fuck to sleep, Byers," he advised, so Jonathan went back inside, leaving the kitchen light on for Hopp.

Feeling marginally better, Hopp lit up a second cigarette.

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"I don't do parties," Jonathan found him saying for the sixth time since Nancy had called him.

"Jonathan. You're seventeen years old and you've never been to a party?!" There was always a little scoff in Steve's voice when he felt there was a shortcoming in their tentative friendship.

"I've been to parties," Jonathan muttered. Tilting his head so that his hair fell into his eyes was such a natural reflex to him at this point that he didn't even realize he was doing it. It'd come into place in his pre-teen years, back when Lonnie interpreted eye-contact as a challenge, as in, '*You got somethin' to say, boy?!*'

No. Jonathan had nothing to say.

"Being the designated driver at Will's DnD bashes doesn't count, man," Steve snickered, slinging a chummy arm around Jonathan's neck and hauling him close. Jonathan winced. He didn't especially hate physical contact, but he wasn't used to it. He didn't know what

to do with himself, where his body was supposed to go, where his limbs were expected to fall when Steve forced this jock-male-bonding type of affection on him. Perhaps he'd been alone too long; maybe he would never know how to relate to other people.

Maybe Nancy sensed Jonathan's mixed feelings, because she stopped Steve with a hand on his arm. "Don't pick on him," she said, frowning. "He doesn't have to go if he doesn't want to. Barb... Barb didn't like parties, either, and that's okay."

At the mention of the dead girl, the mood in the Wheeler's cozy living room sobered a little. Steve released his chokehold on the other boy. "Sorry, man," he said sheepishly. "I was just... I don't know."

"Hey." Jonathan didn't want to be the group buzzkill, but he didn't know the right words to fix it. Hopper would have known. Hopper was good at words, at people. "Hey it's okay. I don't mind. I can... go for a little bit, I guess." He awkwardly, nervously, punched Steve in the shoulder, then immediately felt stupid for trying.

Steve grinned at Jonathan's inept attempts at socialization. "Great. I'll pick you up around nine?"

"I guess."

"Wear something from this century," Steve suggested. "And do something with your hair, maybe? Why is it always-" he flapped a hand in Jonathan's direction, turned a beseeching look on his girlfriend. "Why is it always *like* that?"

"I said to quit picking on him," Nancy reprimanded, but she was fighting back a grin, and Jonathan slouched, glaring at them both.

"You two suck at being friends," he mumbled, letting his hair fall over his eyes again. Steve pushed it away from his face, tilting his head back with a hand squishing Jonathan's cheeks until his lips puffed out to stare into his eyes.

"No way. We're great at being friends. You're just bad at accepting it."

Hopper gave Jonathan a funny look when he emerged from his bedroom that Friday night, shirtless and with his hair stiffened into

weird, meringue-like spikes. "Trying out a new look?" he asked, quirking a wry eyebrow.

Jonathan's face flushed. "When Steve comes to the door, can you tell him I died and can't go to the party?" he asked, sounding hopeless and, at the same time, desperate. "I can't do this. I can't-"

Hopp cocked his head. "Steve... Harrington?" He knew the kid; handsome, athletic, charismatic, and real popular with the ladies. He reminded Hopper a lot of himself at that age.

Suddenly the attempts at new look made sense, and he felt an almost embarrassing fondness for Jonathan. He'd never seen Jonathan try to get along with teens aside from the Wheeler girl before. He smiled, wide and genuine. "You're going to a party!"

"I think I just stated that I'm not, actually," Jonathan said, falling back into his trademark muttering.

"Oh, yes you are. Go wash that gunk out of your hair, go on." the chief nudged Jonathan towards the bathroom. "Just leave it to me."

This was better than good- this was excellent. Jonathan was finally coming out of his shell! He'd made friends! Joyce had confessed to him on more than one occasion how she stressed over Jonathan's happiness, how he'd had to grow up too fast, how his childhood was spent being a father to Will and a breadwinner for the household, and how guilty it all made her feel.

She'd taken Will to the movies- some kid -friendly horror flick that he'd been yammering about nonstop for weeks- and they weren't due back in another half hour or so. How pleased she'd be to hear that Jonathan had gone to a party!

"Hopp!" Jonathan protested as he was pushed more firmly towards the bathroom. His voice broke, eyes wild, and immediately the big man stopped, all enthusiasm forgotten. Had he accidentally hurt him? Sometimes his strength got away with him...

Before he could speak, though, Jonathan ducked his head, murmured, "I'm scared."

Hopper quickly dropped his hands from the boy's shoulders, angrily berating himself. No doubt Lonnie had once pushed the boy around just like this. "Sorry, sorry," he said, taking a step back. "I- I got too enthusiastic. I'm sor-"

"Not of you!" Jonathan's head shot up, actually making eye-contact for once in his surprise. "Not-no. Of the party. Of... of talking to people. What if they're drinking? What if they try to like-" he made a vague gesture to his bare torso.

Oh. The warm fondness returned once more. His teen self wouldn't have been able to relate to Jonathan's struggles- he was about as extroverted as they came. But after losing Sara, he'd withdrawn almost completely into himself. He hadn't wanted to see much of anyone. For years, he avoided all kinds of social interactions, and even now he was still only just getting back to his feet.

"Well," he said. "Shower anyway. You look like a porcupine. When you're done, then make a decision, hm? Let me handle Harrington."

Jonathan considered, then nodded, slipping into the bathroom. The sound of water falling came a second later.

Considering, Hopper turned around and cautiously let himself into Jonathan's bedroom. This was probably breeching yet another boundary- he hadn't come into this room since Will had first gone missing- but, well. In for a penny, in for a pound, like his old ma used to say.

It looked much the same as it had back then; small bed, large stereo, a handful of black -and-white photos taped up here and there. Hopper took the time to look at a few of them, smiling softly when he saw that most of them were pictures of the younger Byers boy. There were good- the kid had a real talent.

But no- he wasn't in here to snoop. He turned his full attention onto the closet and pushed it open, biting his lip as he examined the clothes that hung on wooden hangers. Nothing was really catching his eye at being particularly suitable.

He poked through the pile of discarded clothes on the floor with his

toe until he found an acceptable pair of jeans, turned them rightside-out, and tossed them onto the bed, adding Jonathan's least-battered pair of boots to the pile. Then he quickly hastened to Joyce's bedroom, where a few of his own clothes waited. The royal blue button-up would be too big, but it was stiff, nice material. It looked expensive because it was expensive. That got thrown onto Jonathan's bed, too, along with Hopper's favorite leather jacket and the leather belt with the wide silver buckle.

The shower water stopped flowing just as there was a knock on the front door; Hopper opened it and saw the Harrington boy with his arm thrown around the Wheeler girl's shoulders. "Hey, kids."

"Hi, Chief Hopper," Nancy greeted politely. Steve looked a little startled to see the large cop answering the Byers' door and said nothing, just blinked at him.

"Jonathan's just getting dressed. Want to come in?"

It occurred to him just how easy this all felt, allowing guests inside like he owned the place. He wondered if he should feel bad about that- it wasn't his home after all- but it felt like home. He wanted it to be home.

And the Byers? They felt like family.

Hopp always had the problem of getting too attached, too fast.

Steve cautiously stepped inside, still watching him warily. "Are you and Mrs. Byers... you know..." he asked cautiously.

"Dating?" Hopper felt amused. He, too, had been wary of cops at that age. He wouldn't be surprised to know that Steve had beer or pot in that fancy little road hog of his. "We've... rekindled an old flame. We're seeing how it works out."

Steve bobbed his head. "Cool, cool. You're a lucky man!"

"That I am." Hopp tilted his chin at Nancy. "You are, too. Between Nancy and Jonathan, I'd say you've got some solid-gold friends."

Nancy smiled warmly, and after a pause, Steve did too. "Yes, sir. I

really do."

There was a creak as a door in the hallway opened slightly. "Hopp?" Jonathan hissed. "Can you come here?"

"Scuse me, kids," Hopper excused himself, and started towards the teen's bedroom. "What's up?"

He was pleased to see that Jonathan had dressed in the clothes Hopp had laid out for him; he'd half-expected him to refuse, on pure stubborn principal. He looked good too; really good.

"You're a handsome kid, you know that?" Hopp said, and Jonathan's face turned a deep tomato-red.

"No, I'm not," he muttered. "What do I... Steve said my hair..."

He reached an uncertain hand towards the gel he'd so messed his mane up with earlier. Hopper smacked it away.

"Don't. The peacock out there would be jealous if you had more volume than he does." (Jonathan smiled at last. Good.) "Just..."

He hauled Jonathan towards him by the shoulders, licked his palm, then used the moisture to push his hair back from his face. "Let them see your eyes. You've got good puppy-dog eyes, kiddo; the girls will melt."

Jonathan winced at the Hopp-spit now in his hair. "I just washed that."

"You're washable. You can wash it again. Just trust me, willya? Now listen: there's probably gonna be empty cans of beer outside. Pick one up and carry it around with you if you don't want to drink. And if you need someone to talk to, find a girl that looks bored and ask her if she was in your math class."

"What if she wasn't?"

"Say that sucks, because she looks smart. Then ask her what teacher she did have for math."

"I'm not gonna say *that*-!"

A light tapping on the half-open door caused them both to turn. Harrington and Wheeler were standing in the hallway, twin amused smiles gracing their faces.

"Jonathan!" Nancy squealed. "You look awesome! Cool jacket."

"It's Hopp's," Jonathan muttered self-consciously, starting to duck his head- and then stopped, glancing at Hopper out of the corner of his eye. Hopper shot him a thumbs-up.

"Go have fun," he said, with great feeling. "If you hate it, just call home and ask me to feed the dog because you forgot to do it. I'll come get you."

The dog in question was dozing happily underneath Jonathan's desk, but wagged his tail when he sensed they were talking about him in conjunction with food.

That wild panic was back in Jonathan's eyes, and Hopper steeled himself. The kid was gonna chicken out, after all. Disappointing, but understandable. He prepared himself to play bouncer with the other teens and shoo them out before they upset Jonathan further. Then-

"Okay. Only if you promise you'd come get me."

"Promise. Always." He meant it, too. Even if Joyce came home right now and told Hopper she didn't have feelings for him after all and they needed to break things off; he'd still be there for the Byers family.

Jonathan searched Hopp's eyes for truth, and Hopper let him, knowing it was there. At last Jonathan nodded, satisfied.

"Let's go-o -o!" Steve chanted, thrilled, and threw an arm around his shoulders, dragging Jonathan to the door with Nancy laughing and racing to keep up. The door slammed so loud it rattled the house.

Hopper turned to look at the dog. "Think it'll go well?" he asked.

Chester sneezed, then continued wagging his tail hopefully.

"Me, too," Hopp agreed.

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Curfew for Jonathan was technically at one on weekends, but Joyce, like Jim, had been overwhelmed with happiness at the idea of Jonathan going out and being a normal teenager- too overwhelmed to remind him, and too pleased to drag him back as the clock ticked closer to two. Joyce yawned, falling asleep on the couch where she was curled into Hopper's side. He allowed her to doze off on his chest until he realized her warm weight was making him sleepy, too.

"Hey," he whispered, kissing her temple. "Why don't you go to bed? I'll give it another half hour, then go get him if he doesn't turn up."

She opened one brown eye, focusing on him. "Promise?" she asked. Jonathan had asked him the same thing earlier, and he was just as sincere when he replied, "of course."

*Family*, his heart whispered, euphoric in complete happiness. *Family. Mine.*

Not yet, it's not, he reminded himself firmly, but his attempts at grounding himself down were aborted completely when Joyce yawned, stretched, stood, and mumbled, "Love you, Hopp," as she retreated to her bedroom.

They were sleep-words, child's words. 'I love you' as in, you're an old, dear friend. As in, you believed in me when everyone else said I was crazy. As in, you saved my baby from an otherworldly monster. Surely not anything more than that.

"I love you, too, J," he replied, too quiet to be heard over the creaking of her bedsprings as she lay down.

Hopp read a couple more pages of yesterday's newspaper as he waited it out, then figured if he didn't get his rear in gear soon, he'd be too tired to see the road. He'd just stuffed his feet into a pair of shoes when he heard a car door slam outside. He then retreated back to the couch and picked his newspaper up again, not wanting to look like he was looming creepily in the hallway.



The key scrabbled around the metal doorhandle for a good twenty-five seconds before Jonathan managed to insert it and push the door open, making Hopper frown. There was no way Jonathan had been drinking- not a snowball's chance in hell. Maybe it was just too dark to see outside?

Nope. As the teenager stepped into the house, Jim got a good whiff off his pores almost immediately. Alcohol- a lot of it- and certainly not just beer. His forehead furrowed.

Jonathan turned to wave over his shoulder at the car that idled behind him before stepping fully into the house. He was still wearing Hopp's shirt, though the top three buttons had been undone, and carried the leather jacket slung over his arm, guilty as sin. He crept into the house, then jumped about a foot when Hopper drily asked, "You have a good time, kiddo?"

When he whipped around to face the couch, Hopper's brow only furrowed deeper. There was a distinct bruise on Jonathan's clavicle- and he knew exactly what it implied. Boy; for his first party, the kid really hadn't been holding back.

"Hopp!" Jonathan said, realizing he was too loud a second too late and clapping a hand over his mouth. He stood very still, in a posture Jim knew only too well: it was the would-be-casual of the strongly intoxicated pretending with all his might that he was sober. "Hey, uh; shhh-Sorry I was outta little late, uh," he slurred, then grinned. "Jusht havin' a good time with m'friends."

"I'll say," Hopp replied drily, and gestured the newspaper towards the hickey on Jonathan's chest. "Who was marking you- Wheeler? Harrington? Some lucky third party?"

Jonathan glanced down at himself, flushed, and held the jacket up to cover the mark. "That'sh not what it lookshlike."

"Uh-huh."

Hopper couldn't say why he was being so droll. Most teens in Hawkins drank and screwed around; it was a tiny town with fuck-all else to do. Hell, he'd done a hell of a lot more than that in his

heyday. But something about this didn't sit right with him. This wasn't how Jonathan behaved at all. It made a warning bell- well, not ring, exactly, but fidget in the back of Hopper's brain. "Touch your finger to your nose and come walk toe-to-heel to me."

Jonathan glared at him. "I don't want to."

"Jonathan, you're so drunk I can smell it from here," Hopper pointed out. "What did you do- start drinking the second you got there?"

Jonathan bit his lip, looked away. "Maybe," he muttered. Then, "it made it easier. To be there. To talk t' people. It made people like me more and better. Ish- is that was normal people feel all t'time? Not all scared and stuff?"

Hopper's annoyance was quickly replaced by understanding, then sadness. Drinking to cure social anxiety: a bad habit to develop so young, but something he'd seen many times before. How very Jonathan of him.

"Alright," he stood, approached the teenager, who cringed away.

"You g'nna yell at me?" Jonathan asked, eyes wide in worry.

"Would it make any difference?" Hopper hooked an arm around the kid's waist. "Come on, to the kitchen. You're gonna drink a fuckton of water- you'll thank me later."

Jonathan allowed himself to be steered, accepted the glass of tapwater pushed into his hand, took small sips while still leaning his weight trustingly against the tall man. "You're really big," he said, after the glass was half-empty. "Like, really big."

"So I've heard." Hopper refilled the glass. "Come on- slowly, or you'll puke it all back up."

Jonathan obeyed, compliant and quiet as a churchmouse. As he swallowed, Hopper noticed another bruise, this one lower than the first; dark and fresh. It pissed him off a little- macking on someone this fucking drunk was just bad form all around. He was fairly certain Jonathan wouldn't have consented to such blatant marks had he been sober. The thought of someone doing something like that to Jonathan

against his will made his hand curl protectively around the boy's shoulder.

"That was my first kiss," Jonathan said, laying fully against Hoppers chest while looking into his cup. "I don't even know his name, and it was my first."

Hopper started a little. A guy?! Despite his earlier crack about Harrington, he hadn't honestly considered that possibility. Did it make it worse? Was he just being biased?

"Did you... want him to kiss you?" Hopper asked, softening the gruffness of his voice a little. If

Jonathan hadn't wanted this- if some creep really was taking advantage- Hopper was more than happy to go out and bust some heads.

Jonathan considered the question, then nodded. "It felt nice at first. It got a little too fast, though. I didn't want it after a while, but I didn't know what to do, then. Steve pulled him off of me, yelled at him a lot, so I went and got more to drink."

Hopper growled- actually growled; a low bear sound- causing Jonathan to turn and look at him.

"That's not okay, Jonathan!" Hopper snapped.

Jonathan's eyes opened wide. "I'm sorry!" he said immediately. "I won't do it again-"

Oh for the love of Christ and Chainsaws. "Jonathan, no," he said, very clearly and very slowly. "I'm not angry with you. I'm angry at stupid teenage punks trying to do stuff to you that you're not ready for. You were supposed to have a good time tonight, and they made it bad for you."

"Oh." Jonathan considered this as he finished his water, then put the glass down. "I have to... go to the bathroom."

He was sobering up a little; good. Hopper walked with him to the bathroom, closing the door for him and waiting for him to finish up

and brush his teeth before he emerged again, the vacancy in his eyes now replaced with thoughtfulness.

"You really aren't so bad," Jonathan said, looking up into his face. Hopper rolled his eyes. "Gee, thanks."

"I mean it," Jonathan pressed. "At first I was angry, because you were always around and making stuff weird. But I was also not-angry, because you saved Will. You could probably blow the whole town up and I could never really be mad at you, not after saving him. But I didn't like feeling like I owed you and knowing there was no way I'd ever be able to pay you back, unless someone you loved went missing, and then I'd have to find them for you- that might even the score, but what are the odds of that happening?"

Hopper was once again a little dumbstruck. He'd never before heard Jonathan string so many words together at once, hardly pausing for breath. And he wasn't done yet.

"Then I learned you don't even want us to pay you back, but a Byers always pays his debts. Always. We don't have much, but we have our pride; that's what mom always said, until Will went missing. Then she decided, 'fuck pride; I just want my sons.' So we're in debt to the store, but we're paying it back. But I still have pride, I guess, because I don't like feeling like I owe you!"

"You don't-" Hopper started to interrupt, but was cut off as Jonathan turned on him, walking closer. Hopper took an automatic step back and felt his back touch the wall in the small hallway. There was almost a manic glint in Jonathan's eyes that matched the color in his cheeks; he was oddly lovely just then. Hopper wondered if this was how he looked when he knew he had the perfect shot to capture with his camera.

"- I do!" Jonathan insisted. "I know you love my mom- because, how could you not?- and I know you love Will- ditto- but where do I fit in this picture? Why are you so nice to me?!" he jabbed Hopper in the sternum with his index finger. "You've got me feeling all confused and messed up all the time and I don't know what to do about it, because I don't know what you want from me!"

His voice was rising, and they were, after all, pretty close to Will's room. Jim shushed him. "You should really go to bed, Jonathan-" he said, and was cut off yet another time.

By a pair of lips crashing into his own.

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At first, Hopper's brain wouldn't catch up; it seemed stuck in the 'before' moment. 'Before' Jonathan Byers kissed him.

And it *was* a kiss, even if it felt more like a bruising collision of lips against truck, or counter, or other unyielding, progressing surface. He made a pained noise, reeling, eyes huge.

The 'after' was slow in coming. It happened piece by piece: first Hopper felt the wall under his back and palms; felt it rub his shoulderblades as he panted- not of exertion; just that there seemed to be much less oxygen in the hallway. His sore lips throbbed with a pulse of their own.

Jonathan, his back pressed to the opposite of the wall of the hallway, stared at him, wide-eyed, as though he'd been slapped. He actually ducked his head a moment later, looking for all the world like a frightened dog. "I'm sorry," he gasped. "Don't hate me."

And if that wasn't Jonathan Byers' soul laid raw at his feet, Chief Jim Hopper would be a monkey's uncle. He knew scared honesty when he saw it; the kid practically had his tail tucked between his legs. He was shaking, but he wasn't running. He'd already resigned himself to whatever fate the police chief chose to dish out for him.

"Jonathan," Hopp said quietly. "Why did you kiss me?"

Jonathan peered up at the chief through a thick fringe of dark hair. Hopp instinctively moved to brush it out of his face- then let his hand fall to his side. You shouldn't touch him when you can still feel his saliva on your lips, he thought, and then the reality of the whole situation crashed over him. "Oh, my God," he muttered, hands flying up to the sides of his own face. "Holy shit, Jonathan- you can't do things like that!"

"I'm sorry!" Jonathan said, actually sinking down the wall a few centimeters as though wishing to curl into a ball. "I just... I wanted... You; I wanted- something. I don't know! You were there, and you're so... not very many people are nice to me. I'm-" He seemed to realize his own scandal moments after Hopp had; delayed by youth and drink. Hopp could almost read the words as they flashed through his mind: I just kissed my mom's boyfriend. "Oh..." His hand fluttered up to cover his mouth, as though he could belatedly prevent it from its forbidden actions.

Well, no need to have a complete meltdown.

Already, Hopp's logical mind was looking for explanations. Daddy issues, His mind whispered, but that was too unkind- and, likely, true- to say aloud. "It's okay. You've been drinking; you've been through a lot of weird shit tonight; your hormones are going crazy. Let's not make this weird, hey? I bet we'll be laughing about this when we're old."

He didn't think so, but so long as he stayed calm, maybe Jonathan would, too.

Jonathan regarded him for an uncomfortable length of time before sighing. Then, at least, Hopp could breathe too.

"I think I'm just gonna go to bed," Jonathan mumbled. Hopp leapt on the idea.

"Good plan!" he said, a little too heartily.

Jonathan, head bowed and arms comically stiff, handed Hopper's jacket back over. "I'll um. I'll give you the shirt and belt back when I-" he made a gesture towards his bedroom. Hopper nodded like a bobblehead on a dashboard.

"No hurry! I don't need them back right away! Don't start- start stripping in the hallway, haha-" Oh God, he needed to shut up. And to pop a Xanax or two. It wasn't like he hadn't been kissed by drunk girls- drunk people. There was that time with Benny in high school-

No, thinking about Benny still hurt. Suffice it to say, sure this was

awkward, but he didn't need to compound the error. "Sleep well, kiddo!" he bade, and hurried off for Joyce's bedroom as quickly as he was able, trying to ignore the fact that he could still feel the ghost of her teenage son's lips flush against his.

As it turned out, forgetting wasn't as easy as he might have hoped.

Jonathan, visibly hungover, was still awake early enough to fix breakfast (pancakes, because it was Saturday.) He answered his mother's questions about the party in monosyllabic grumbles, and cringed when Will's voice too-loudly expounded on the cartoon he'd been watching.

Hopper's eyes flicked to the boy's lips once, just out of curiosity- they were just the tiniest bit bruised swollen, and it made his heart clench like a guilty fist. The fist doubled it's crushing grip when Jonathan saw him looking and quickly turned away. Fuck. How much did he remember?!

Hopper had replayed the memory over and over last night while trying to force himself to sleep- it seemed as though the more he tried to forget it, the more his memory clung to the image. Had he kissed back? Even for only one fractional second; spurred by instinct if nothing else? Had he reciprocated?! What sort of monster would that make him?

"What are you doing today, bud?" he asked Will, to distract himself from the downward spiral his mind was trapped inside.

He agreed easily when Will asked him if he'd give him and Dustin a ride to the Wheeler's house, though he still had to shower he'd promised to get to the office early. Honestly, the more time he spent with the Byers, the better he was performing at work, if only because he was drunk less often.

You could sure taste the tequila on Jonathan, though. Could taste the lime and the salt and everything, a nasty voice in his mind supplied, and he slammed it down like he would a crawling insect. Suddenly the family resemblance between the three faces at the table became too much-three pairs of wide, heavily-lashed dark eyes; three sets of fine-boned faces and thin frames.

Hopp couldn't finish his pancakes.

It was inescapable, though. The shower smelled of the shampoo and soap the Byers boys shared, despite the stronger scent of Hopp's own products. Jonathan's acne treatment was on the sink. There were three towels hanging on the rack, three toothbrushes in the cup on the sink. All of a sudden, everything was too much. He was already feeling rattled as he stepped, towel-wrapped, from the bathroom and into Joyce's room- and felt his heart stop again when he saw Jonathan sitting on the very bed where he and Joyce had made love so many times now.

Fucking Hell. Was he being punished by the Gods? And for what?! He hadn't done anything wrong yet...

Yet. You feel it in the air, don't you, Jimmy? Your self-destruct antennae have sensed another way to fuck your life up, and they're eager to start ripping and tearing. You know you'll fall onto this sooner or later, you-

No. Not this time. There was more at stake than his own stability here.

Jonathan stared at the tall man with the towel wrapped around his hips as he stood in the doorway, feeling like a stranger in a strange land. A land where all three inhabitants shared the same thick brown hair and bow-shaped lips. "I'm just getting my clothes-" he said, as though stating the obvious.

"Hi, Hopp. Jonathan and I were just talking-" Joyce's voice came from the closet where she was threading new laces into her work shoes, and Hopp's knees nearly sagged in relief. So there was a perfectly logical explanation for Jonathan's presence in the room after all. Not an attempt on any continuation, or an effort to talk about what had happened-

Unless that's exactly why he's here. What if he already told Joyce and she wants you to pack your shit and go?

She hadn't sounded angry, though. In fact, she offered him a warm smile as he shuffled around her to grab his duffle bag and route



around for a clean uniform to change into. He held it over his chest, though Jonathan had stopped staring at him and was only staring at his hands in his lap.

"Jonathan said that you helped him get ready for the party, and calmed him down when he got nervous about it!" Joyce beamed at him like he was some kind of hero, and maybe sometimes he was, but he certainly wasn't feeling at all heroic now.

"I guess a little," he shrugged uncomfortably. "Mostly just loaned him some clothes."

"Well, I think that's very nice." Joyce continued smiling at him. She tilted her face back, clearly asking for a kiss, and it took all of Hopp's willpower not to glance at Jonathan again, a prickle of wrongness sparking in his chest. They'd kissed chastely in front of the kids before. If he suddenly stopped now, it'd look extremely weird. He lowered his head and brushed his lips fleetingly over hers. Why had he never really paid attention before of how much the Byers' looked like each other?

*If I'd known it was going to ruin everything anyway, I may as fuking well have kissed him back,* he thought, and regretted the thought immediately.

"Hey, J?" Hopper said, already out the door with his clothes- he'd change in the bathroom; there was no way he was stripping down with you-know-who on the bed. "I'm gonna be at my place tonight, okay? I need to take care of some stuff there."

"Oh!" she looked fleetingly disappointed, but then smiled again. "Yeah, of course. Call me, okay?"

"You bet."

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Jonathan was quickly becoming agitated.

The first day Hopper was gone made sense- the guy had his own life, after all. It could be a coincidence. (And heck, even if it wasn't, could

he really blame the guy? He'd probably want some time off from Byersville after all that.)

The second day that went by and not a word was heard from the police chief, Joyce's smile began looking a little fixed, and Jonathan knew why. She was no doubt remembering past days, days when their ages still had the word 'teen' behind the number, where Hopp would kiss and dash.

*(Fuck and dash, his mind supplied, even if he didn't want to think of his mother fucking anyone at any age.)* Hopper sure had a history of leaving behind lonely hearts in his inability to commit.

This time wasn't like those times, though- maybe she'd really started to hope he might stay- and for good.

And so as day two became day three, she finally gave in and called him herself twice. The first time, Jonathan heard the cheerful message she left him on his answering machine. "Hey, stranger! Just wondering if you're free tonight... The boys and I have some movies, some popcorn...?"

It broke Jonathan's heart to hear her sounding so hopeful. He forced himself to listen anyway as a form of self-flagellation; he deserved this guilt after what he'd done.

The second time she called was several hours later, just before dusk. She didn't leave a message, hanging up immediately when the tinny recorded voice came on the line. "Hey, you're reached Jim Hopper's phone. Please leave a message after the beep-"

It was on day six that Jonathan had had enough. The final straw was Will's doe eyes blinking sadly at the chair where Hopp had been occupying for weeks at the breakfast table, now empty. He was missing the guy he'd so readily accepted into the family and seen snatched away just like that. It made Jonathan's blood boil. Okay; he could understand if Hopp was pissed at him. But why punish Will for it?! Enough was enough.

It was late afternoon by the time Jonathan had a spare moment to drive to the lakeside trailer where he knew the man lived alone. He'd

amplified his mood by playing his more aggressive mixed tapes, and was spoiling for an argument by the time he boldly climbed the steps to the front door and wrapped his knuckles sharply on the wood paneling.

He had to pause and do this three more times before he heard stirring within the home. "A'right, a-fuckin'-right," he could hear Hopper complaining on the toher side of the door, before the locks turned in their casings and the barrier slipped open.

Hopper looked a mess. Rumpled clothes, pillow creases on his face. His eyes were reddened-possibly from crying, though Jonathan thought he knew the real reason why- and he stank of beer. He clearly hadn't expected to see Jonathan there, because he stopped, head cocked, mouth drooped. "Jonathan?"

The teenager nodded sharply. "You said-" he'd practiced the little speech on the drive over, but he already felt silly for it. Still, he had to try. "You told me that if I have a problem with you, I should drag you outside and - and yell at you, or throw a few punches, but to never shut you out." He licked his lower lips, felt a flutter of something in his stomach when he noticed Hopper's eyes flicker onto his mouth. "Well... now you're the one shutting me out, so I guess I need to drag you outside and throw a few punches, just like you said."

Hopper only continued to stare at him. Was he high? He was very possibly high. Jonathan probably wasn't supposed to punch intoxicated people. But that was what he'd come here to do, and it was kind of a long drive; it wasn't like they had a huge fortune to blow on gas for the hell of it.

So he took a step back and grabbed Hopper's wrist, tugging on it until the man obligingly stepped, barefoot, off the porch and onto ground level. Jonathan took a deep, fortifying breath, and then threw a punch.

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Hopp, his reflexes dulled by intoxication, barely moved out of the way in time; Jonathan's swing grazed his face, and the older man swore. "Jesus, kid."

"Talk to me or fight," Jonathan said, almost unable to believe what was coming out of his mouth. "But don't shut me out. Wasn't that the rule?" He swung again.

This time, the chief caught his fist in his large hand, stopping it mid-flight and squeezing, refusing to let Jonathan have it back. "Knock it off!"

"Not until you talk to me!"

"Go home, kid!"

"And stop calling me that!"

Hopper scowled. "But you are. You're a child."

If the emphasis on that last word was unintentional, Jonathan would eat his hat.

"That why you're being such a prick? Because I k-kissed you and it made you feel weird?"

The grip on his hand tightened. Hopp didn't answer, but his scowl deepened. "Say it a little louder for all the neighbors to hear, why don't you?"

There were no neighbors as far as Jonathan could see, aside from the occasional dozing goose or duck, so he didn't bother to respond with more than a wry eyebrow arch.

Hopp cleared his throat. "You were drunk."

"I did it because I wanted to. You didn't kiss back, so I don't know what you feel so 'guilty' about."

He aimed a punch with his free hand and, when Hopper caught that wrist, too, he raised a knee to Hopper's groin. The older man barely stepped back in time, nearly dragging them both off balance.

"Thought you were a better fighter than this," Hopp panted, using the strength of his arms to keep Jonathan from breaking free and punching him again. "You really served Harrington his ass on a

platter last year and now you can't even land a single hit?"

Okay, maybe Jonathan was holding back a little. A lot. He was angry, but not with the same all-consuming anger it'd taken to beat Steve's face into a bloody pulp. He hoped he never felt anger like that again; it was a little scary knowing that that potential for violence lived within him-- lived there still, slumbering like a dragon. "Well, you're not fighting back enough to be worth it."

He was attempting to goad Hopp, to make him angry enough to- to what? Into hitting him? Did Jonathan want to be hit? Maybe.

"I'm... I'm fucked up, Hopp," he admitted, with a bitter little laugh. "I know. I know I am. I know I'm a creep."

The kids at school were right to isolate him. Steve and Nancy were, by all means, stupid to forgive him for his past weirdness. It'd gone nowhere but deeper down, mining for new resources; he just kept quiet about it. He'd been weird since he was little-- Lonnie had sure sensed it. Had brought it up constantly. 'Weird little fucker, skulking around all quiet... Does anything go on in that head of his or is it just radio static?'

"A creep that likes kissing guys nearly three times his age?"

Hopp didn't deliver the harsher of available blows: *you like kissing guys who've fucked your mother?* - and for that Jonathan was grateful.

"I-" Jonathan felt his cheeks flare hot. "I. Maybe. Yes. Okay, the point is, I'm sorry, okay? It won't happen again. Hate me if you want to, I don't care." A lie. He cared more than he'd ever willingly admit. "But... but don't ghost mom and Will out of the picture, okay? It hurts them. Look, in less than a year I'll be gone, and you won't have to deal with me anymore. If I fuckin' promise not to kiss you again, can we just--"

They weren't even grappling anymore; just standing out in the open by the lake, with both of Jonathan's wrists held over their heads by the chief's bearlike hands, mere inches separating their noses. He smelled whisky, cigarettes, and pot. The man desperately needed a shower and a shave...

Yet the urge to kiss him again was there, stronger than ever.

He looked away, focusing on the treeline, the nesting grackles in the branches, felt Hopp's breath touch his neck.

"It's not just that you kissed me," Hopp admitted, voice gruff. "That was... I coulda gotten past that. Drunk idiot did something stupid; what else is new?"

Jonathan's ears flushed. He kept looking at the trees. He continued telling himself that Hopp hadn't moved, almost imperceptibly, closer.

"What I couldn't get past was..." Hopp swore loudly, and shoved Jonathan hard, releasing him.

Jonathan stumbled to keep his balance, startled into looking at him from the abrupt movement.

"What was it?" he prompted, heart pounding, and wet his suddenly dry lips. Hopp grit his teeth, turned away in disgust. "Just leave it. I told you to go home."

"No-" Jonathan said, hurrying back to him. He almost didn't recognize his own voice; when had it become eager, almost consolatory? Was he really such a vile thing as this? Whatever it was, his good intentions all but vanished at the first scent of opportunity. "No, tell me-"

He rested a hand on Hopp's shoulder.

In a breathtaking whirlwind of movement, Hopp had him by the waist and off his feet, slamming his back so hard into the side of the trailer that something on the other side of the wall fell and broke with a crash. A bottle maybe, or a mug.

"Damnit, Jonathan!" Hopper roared, looking half-crazed with his blue eyes bugging and his face all red. "Damn it, and damn you."

Jonathan wheezed breathlessly, the air knocked clean from his lungs from the impact. Hopp's fingers tightened, digging bruises into Jonathan's ribs. He'd been so careful with Jonathan up until today, treating him like he was made of glass, and now that was all out the

window. He felt a sharp, horrible spike of satisfaction, of validation that he'd managed to drive Hopp to this. The bighero of Hawkins! The gruff cop with a heart of gold! Throwing teenagers around like ragdolls.

Oh how the mighty fall.

There was no such thing as a good man. Jonathan had just proved it to himself once and for all and it was such a relief to do-- this 'good guy' act had been forcing him to anxiously reevaluate his worldview. Ambiguity, no longer!

"I think you're guilty because you wanted to kiss me too," he said aloud, voice a hoarse whisper. "I think you're going to."

Hopp swayed, expression disbelieving. "I wouldn't-" his voice was almost a whimper, pleading for understanding. "I wouldn't hurt you. You're a kid. I'm not like that..."

He wanted Jonathan to comfort him, to soothe him, to make all the bad feelings go away. Of course not, Hopp; you're good! It's all a lie!

Instead, Jonathan wrapped an arm around his neck, lightly grazing blunt, bitten nails into Hopp's scalp, his short hair soft as rabbit fur despite its greasiness. He turned to look at Hopp with his eyes- dark eyes, zombie eyes, Lonnie used to call them; eyes as empty as caverns that reflected only the depth of human misery back at their beholder.

"We can't do this," Hopp whispered, mouth a hairsbreadth from Jonathan's own. He wanted Jonathan to be the one to stop this- the teen knew he could, knew he should.

"You're right," he agreed, and kissed him anyway.

Hopper let out a breath like he'd been punched, eyes squinting closed, and then he grabbed a fistful of the hair at the back of Jonathan's head, yanking his head back as he devoured the teenager's mouth, letting out little moans as he did so like a starving man stumbling across a meal.

Jonathan tilted his head back, feeling his mind go blissfully blank as his lips parted and eagerly accepted the seeking tongue, moaning

himself when he felt it lick hot and wrong into his mouth. forceful and demanding. Stubble harshly chafed his smooth skin. A hand cupped his throat; he pressed his back flat to the trailer wall and allowed Hopper to step between his legs in an effort to bring them closer.

At some point he'd grabbed dual fistfulls of Hopper's shirt as he squirmed and searched for a better angle, arching his back away from the wall and into Hopper's body. He now trailed a hand down the big man's barrell chest, feeling the wiry muscles under the layer of soft and the thatch of hair. He spread his legs further apart, his meaning so clear that Hopper growled predatorily.

"Shouldn't," Hopp said again, tilting his face away, nose mashing Jonathan's, and Jonathan grabbed him by the chin, hauling him right back into the mess as he rolled his hips.

He didn't really know what he was doing- his V-card was still intact, despite his creepiness- but he was a sharp kid and this wasn't rocket science. He understood the mechanics and the gist of it, and the steel trap of his mind detached all emotion from the proceedings aside from a want to self-destruct in as spectacular a fashion as possible. One collapsing star recognized another.

"I want you to rip me apart," he mumbled into Hopp's mouth, and then the big man's hands were everywhere, yanking on his shirt, palming flat to his belly - this made him shiver, so soon flat brushing palms became dragging nails, and that made his cock twitch and weep and complain in the trapped confines of his trousers. He dropped a hand to his belt, and Hopper slapped it away only to replace it with his own.

He pressed his huge palm flat against Jonathan's straining erection, forcing the teenager to cry out loud. It was incredible, just the tiny little shivers of skin, and that was just through layers of fabric. He wanted to ask for more, but the wild look in Hopp's eye sealed his lips even as it kicked his pulse from desire to anxiety. He licked his lips again and tasted Hopp on them.

"Can I-" Hopp started to ask. Jonathan slapped a hand over his mouth.



"Don't talk. Just do. Whatever it is, the answer's yes." If he had to answer the same question worded differently every time- *No, Hopper, you're not raping me*- he thought he might go insane and weep or scream or laugh.

Hopper nodded, expression shuttering, and stepped back, pulling Jonathan with him. His hand fumbled for the doorknob.

The inside of the trailer was messy- bottles and fast food cartons everywhere; books half-read and left to collect dust, a television hissing quiet static in the corner. Jonathan saw the beer bottle that had fallen off the kitchen counter earlier, shattered to glittering shards of brown glass. A puddle of lukewarm, fizzy beer spread out among the fabrics and stained the tile. Come step on me, the glinting wet glass seemed to beckon.

Jonathan looked around- there was only one hallway, leading down to what must be the bedroom.

He tugged Hopper towards it. Hopper balked yet again.

"I don't think-"

Jonathan whipped his shirt off and dropped it on the ground, then pulled hard on Hopper's arm. "I do."

Hopper followed. So damn weak, having to be lead by the nose every step of the way when he fucking knew he was going to go through with it, as though, by protesting, he could later heap all the blame on Jonathan. Well, you see, he wanted it, officer. Wouldn't take no for an answer...

He had to kiss Hopper again as he walked backwards into the bed. He tripped over something-piled laundry - and would have fallen had the big man not caught him. That moment of vulnerability brought a tender look into the man's eyes- he wanted, so badly, to be the nurturer, even in moments like this. Jonathan closed his eyes to block it out.

"I need..." he choked out, and Hopper's hand held his face, fingers sliding sweetly through his hair.

"What do you need?" he asked, voice warm as honey. If he thought he was kidding anyone pretending he wasn't as hard-up for this as Jonathan was, he was dumb as he was tall.

"Hit me. Or bite me. Pull my hair. Make me feel something, Hopp, please."

"You need it rough, baby?"

That 'baby' caught them both off guard; Hopp was looking a little embarrassed at the slip. He cleared his throat, furrowed his brow. "I can be rough," he said, and shoved Jonathan forcefully back onto the unmade bed. Jonathan grabbed onto the thick flannel sheets as he bounced, sending another bottle or two landing on the carpeted floor. He reached a second time for the belt of his jeans and, again, was stopped by Hopp's hands.

This time, the older man made quick work of them, staring forcefully into Jonathan's eyes all the while. Jonathan toed his shoes off as his jeans were wrenched down to his knees and then Hopp was on him, almost three hundred pounds of thick muscle and fat and body hair and it was crushing him in a way that Jonathan found almost shamefully agreeable as he mewled and bucked up into that bearlike warmth.

"Hopp," he gasped. "Hopp, Hopp..."

Hopp's teeth found his shoulder, biting hard. So hard it hurt, it tore. Jonathan ground his cock upwards, leaking so much now that it'd made the front of his briefs transparent. His scrabbling fingers rucked up the back of Hopp's shirt and dug in deep. He let the broken things inside of him flay Hopp open raw, even as he caught and shredded himself upon Hopp's own brokenness. *Let's destroy each other and bleed out like the beer in that bottle*, he thought, and moaned at the hands finding their way under his thighs, wrenching his legs apart and ripping his ratty underwear right off his hips until he was naked underneath a fully-dressed man.

Hopp met his eyes again as he squeezed Jonathan's erection in his huge hand and began to stroke, slowly at first, but forceful; adding a twist at the tip that caused Jonathan to see stars. His head fell back,

mouth open in a silent scream.

"You're beautiful," he thought he heard Hopp whisper.

*Am I as beautiful as my mother?* he wanted to ask, and then he held back a hysterical burble of laughter by clenching down on his teeth. He didn't really want to know the answer to that question.

Hopp jerked him quickly and efficiently like it was his job and, though his hand was dry and calloused, it was good. Much better than the stolen moments Jonathan had in the dead of night, humping his mattress and being as quiet as possible, or quickly rubbing one out in the shower. This was prolonged, building peaks threatening at an embarrassingly fast climax. He didn't want to say the word 'stop', as that would likely bring back all of Hopp's hangups, so instead he shoved his hand away and made to sit up.

"I want more," Jonathan explained. "I want you."

Not for the first time, Hopper hesitated, so Jonathan took it upon himself to scoot forward and unzip Hopper's trousers. He was not stopped. Nor was he halted as he boldly reached inside the parted zipper teeth and found hot, slick, wet thickness- no underwear to impede him.

"You don't have to-" Hopper started. Jonathan ignored him.

Hopper's dick was as well endowed as the rest of his body. Thick; uncut; long. It smelled musky and a little sour when Jonathan studied it, but, standing, Hopper was the perfect height for Jonathan slouching on the low bed. He touched his tongue to the slit and felt Hopper jerk in his hand. He covered his teeth with his lips and laved his tongue over the helmet, glancing up at Hopper's face as he did so.

Hopper moaned when Jonathan hollowed his cheeks, sucked him down as deep as he was able. He gagged the second Hopper's dick brushed the back of his throat and eased up immediately, not wanting to puke all over his bed. He tried to breathe through his nose and relax his jaw as he sucked and licked at the tip of the large erection and used his hands to work the rest.

Hopper touched the back of Jonathan's head and, for a moment, Jonathan thought that he was going to stroke his hair, maybe pull it away from his face. But no- the hand on his head was pushing, guiding Jonathan's mouth lower. The thought made Jonathan shift on the bed, spreading his legs apart and rutting the mattress to give himself some relief. He did as silently requested and nuzzled at the full, low-hanging sac, tonguing Hopp's balls.

"Yes," Hopper encouraged throatily. "Oh, yeah, baby boy- right there."

Jonathan's mouth was thick with precum as he slowly took Hopper's balls into his mouth, running his tongue back and forth over them. The hands in his hair tightened, wrenching so hard that tears filled his eyes. He ground the bed harder and had to pull back.

"You gonna fuck me, Hopp?" he asked, voice raspier than usual from the throat exercises. His heart pounded at the question; he felt stupid saying such adult words for the first time-- felt that it must be incredibly obvious to Hopper that he was faking his own nonchalance, masking his nervousness under a guise of breezy, indifferent worldliness. Or maybe that was just what it was to be a grown-up: fake everything until eventually it no longer feels terrifying in newness.

"I don't have any slick for that," Hopp said and, at Jonathan's skeptical look, pressed, "I don't exactly fuck a lot of guys."

"So what do you use to jack off, then?" Jonathan pressed. Surely Hopper didn't go find some girl every time he woke with a stiffy.

In response, Hopper stuck a hand into his bedside cabinet and produced a bottle of hand lotion-unscented Goldbond, the kind mom carried at the store. "I'm not putting this up your ass, kid," Hopper said and, feeling stupid, Jonathan jerked his red face away. "Right. Never mind then-"

A heavy hand rested on his shoulder, pulling. "Hey. Nobody leaves my bed unsatisfied. Turn around."

The order in his voice brought Jonathan's erection up from half-chub to full-mast and pulsing in a heartbeat; he shivered, and Hopper

grinned, at last accepting that, since they were on the road to hell anyway, might as well enjoy the ride. "You like that? Then I'll say it again: Turn the fuck around, get on your hands and knees, and give me that sweet ass of yours, now."

Jonathan scrambled to do so, eager and desperate and shaking violently all the while. His fingers clenched and unclenched in the sheets and he felt exposed to Hopper's sweeping eyes. "You look good enough to eat," he announced, and Jonathan's pointing cock drooled onto the bed. He'd never been this hard or wet in his life.

Hopper's hands clasped onto his cheeks, massaged, pulling and stretching, exposing his hole to the air and then hiding it; again, again, again.

"Wish I could fuck you there," Hopp mused, almost to himself. "You look so tight. I just want to wreck you."

"You could-" Jonathan started, and then yelped when Hopper slapped him hard on the left cheek. His hips thrust and he whined, almost coming on the spot from the impact alone. If Hopper spanked him again, he probably would come.

"I told you no," Hopper growled. "Gonna fuck your pretty thighs instead."

"Hopp-" Jonathan tried.

"Call me Jimmy," Hopp requested. He squeezed the bottle into his hand- it made an embarrassing splurt noise- and clapped his hands together, rubbing the lotion vigorously to warm it before slicking it onto Jonathan's inner thighs, brushing his balls and cock as he worked. He hadn't rubbed it in much before he was gripping Jonathan's hips and sliding his cock between Jonathan's legs.

Jonathan squeaked- a humiliating sound that had Hopp huffing out a laugh against his shoulders. "This is an old trick," he said. "For girls who want to get off but don't want to put out. You fuck 'em right and you can have them coming pretty fast, just gotta bump their clit and-"

He thrust his hips, mashing his cock with Jonathan's. It was messy

and sticky and Jonathan was bucking his hips for more friction.

"Plus, the view is spectacular," Hopp concluded in satisfaction, patting Jonathan's ass to get his point across.

"I thought I told you to stop talking," Jonathan panted. "Jimmy."

Hopper growled and gripped his throat, hauling him back almost onto his haunches as he thrust up into him. Jonathan sighed at the pleasure and pain of it all, easily allowing Hopper to squeeze his neck and yank his hair and bite again and again into his shoulders, just as he'd requested. He brought his own hands to his sensitive nipples, thumbing them into stiff little peaks.

Hopper brought a hand back down after a minute to begin jerking Jonathan's cock again, and Jonathan laid against his chest, trusting him to support his weight as he closed his eyes and let the good sensations run over him, drowning out all other feeling. There was only the slap of skin on skin; the stink of sweat; the panting and occasional moan as both men neared a release. It was building now, coiling deep within Jonathan's guts. They were mindless, filthy animals rutting in heat. He wished he had something to hold onto.

When he heard Hopper's muffled grunt, felt hot spurt after spurt splash between his thighs, he allowed himself to let go too, crashing down. The name that left his lips was not 'Jimmy', but in fact started with an 'L' and was forced from his lips with neither his awareness nor his noticing. He collapsed onto his hands and knees and, when his shaking elbows were unable to support him, sank onto his chest on the bed, with Hopper quickly flopping next to him.

There was a stitch in his chest, painful, and he breathed through it, his brain a scrambled whirlwind as he attempted to regroup, taking careful track of his faculties. The quickly cooling cum between his thighs would soon itch and tighten and burn - he should wash that. But the thought of borrowing Hopper's bathroom to wash up brought with it a new series of anxieties.

He became aware that Hopper's arm was around him a moment later and, following that, he tuned into what the man was lazily mumbling:

"- can get you something to eat, or--"

"No." Jonathan sat up- his body was wobbly, trembling all over, but it supported him. Hopper frowned.

"Okay...?"

Jonathan ignored his puzzled tone, merely went in search of his clothing, all-too aware of how naked he was, of Hopper's eyes on his body. As eager as he'd been for it to happen, he was twice as eager, now, to leave.

He wrestled free of the pile of flannel sheets, putting distance between them, trying not to let his panic show too hard. He was already starting to be sore in weird places. Maybe if he felt angry enough at Hopp, he wouldn't have to be disgusted with himself.

But Hopp always had been good at reading people, even in these circumstances. "Kid. Jonathan. Are you... going to be okay?"

Jonathan laughed. He couldn't help himself- it left his mouth bitter as lemons. "Is that something you really have the right to ask me now?"

Hopper looked as though Jonathan had punched him, and the teen felt a spike of guilt. This was at least three-quarters his fault, he knew. So to lash out now was completely unfair. And yet-

"Come home," he demanded, stuffing himself haphazardly back into his clothing. His shoes were on the wrong feet; his shirt buttons misaligned. He didn't even bother with socks or torn underwear, instead stuffing those into his pocket as he searched around the laundry piles and beer bottles for his car keys. His voice broke, sounding disturbingly close to tears. "You're coming home soon," he said, voice still too high. "To mom. And Will. You'll make things normal again. You'll make her happy again."

Hopper's brow furrowed, post-orgasmic fog making coherent thinking a struggle. "Is that a threat? You blackmailing me?"

Jonathan held back a snort. Blackmail? What leverage did he have- it wasn't like he'd bothered to bring a recording device. He wasn't about to go get DNA swabs off his skin. And who would believe the creepy

almost-adult anyway? Those were just the words of a paranoid man who knew he'd done something wrong but hadn't yet figured out that he would never get caught.

"Just do it. Just make everything normal again."

He walked for the door, heard Hopper struggle to sit up behind him, and walked faster, anxiety and guilt gnawing a hole in his stomach. He had to leave now or he'd start screaming and breaking things. He had to get into his beloved car, get his precious music blasting as loud as he was able, as fast as he was able, before he'd be able to think clearly again - before he'd be able to breathe. Before his mind forced him to relieve all the humiliating things he'd done and asked for-- and said.

"Jonathan!" Hopper called when he reached the porch, and he heard the man stand, race after him. He ignored it, feeling only the deepest of relief when at last his hand closed around the handle of his beloved car door. "Wait!"

He peeled away as fast as he was able the second he shifted gears, not looking into the rearview mirror as he left the lake, the trailer, and Chief Jim Hopper behind. Only then did the first tear track its way down his jaw.

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Driving the kid all the way to New York was a two -day expenditure that Joyce couldn't afford. She was already on very thin ice at work for all the money she'd borrowed and time she'd taken off in search of Will- capitalism marched on its cheerless, uncaring path, missing children or no-and so the task fell onto Hopper's shoulders instead.

Neither he nor Jonathan were too enthused by this development, but neither had much choice in the matter: Joyce's final word was law.

"Why can't I just drive myself?" Jonathan asked only once as the plans were made. The answer was simple: he probably could drive himself, but then the car he and his mother shared would be out of her reach. He was expected to survive on public transport while



attending the university he'd slaved four years of his life away ensuring he received enough scholarships to attend. He didn't ask again after the point was made clear to him- didn't say much at all- but Hopper could tell that the realization he'd no longer have access to the beloved car upset him-- and then made him feel selfish for feeling disappointed.

He wanted to tell Jonathan that it was okay to wish he could keep the damn car. He wanted to tell him that there was no need to take the responsible, moral high ground whenever situations involved his mother... but he couldn't. He hadn't actually been able to speak with Jonathan in the five months that followed their incident together. Not more than a few words, anyway, and those always spoken in Joyce's presence so she would hopefully never catch on to the undeniable tension between teenager and cop.

Jonathan's eighteenth birthday came and went without fanfare and Hopper was disgusted with himself at how much this tiny milestone relieved him. At least he's legal now, he found himself thinking, and then he'd gone to a bar and gotten so blackout-drunk that he woke in a bus station with no recollection as to how he'd gotten there and was forced to embarrassingly call Callahan and ask for a ride home.

When had he become the kind of person to concern himself with whether a kid was above the age limit or not? Simple: he'd never had the inkling to fuck one before. His interest in teenagers had vanished as soon as he no longer was one- the natural order of things- and then, bam, like a bombshell from the heavens, Jonathan had happened to him and nothing was normal anymore-might not ever be normal again.

He was disgusting. He deserved to hang for what he'd done. He internally flinched every time he made eye-contact with the kid, and his skin crawled when his subconscious couldn't help but to pick up tiny similarities between mother and son: the way their dark eyes became so focused when they wanted something; the cant to their hips when they came.

If he was a stronger man, he would have told Joyce and accepted the deserved wrath she'd reign upon him. He'd likely be forced to leave town after she was done with him-- and it was possible he'd never be

working with the police force again. If she really dug for it, he could even be arrested-- but this, he doubted very much. He was a well-liked white man, and he knew the odds; the laws were always unfairly advantageous to them, no matter how much they deserved to be strung up by their balls.

So, long -story short, he wasn't at all delusioned that their trip together would be a pleasant one. At best, it'd be thousands of miles of road and tense, uncomfortable silence all the way. He hoped that's what it would be, anyway.

They worked in silent tandem in the days preceding the venture, loading the Beater up with Jonathan's belongings. The kid had been born and raised in the shabby little house; it must have been shocking to him to see how little it took to erase one's own existence from a room. Without his appliances and posters and artwork and curtains and bedding and stereo and office supplies...

Why, it wasn't His Room anymore at all, but just A room, with empty furniture and carpet pressed down flat.

Will tried not to cry at the inevitable, encroaching loss of his brother, however temporary- ("I'll be back in time for Christmas; I'll write every week!")- but he was certainly clinging close to Jonathan's side in the last few weeks, hardly wanting to be separated from the teenager at all.

At last, the day arrived that Hopper and Jonathan, after many hugs from Joyce and Will, after breakfast sandwiches were pressed into their hands, they set out before dawn in early September, roadmap spread over the dashboard, and began the journey.

As Hopp had predicted, the silence was near complete. The first hour was nothing but silent tension. The car was not big enough to hold the two of them, all their luggage, and the elephant in the room, but neither was willing to speak just yet.

One hour became four before they had to stop at a gas station to piss and fuel the car back up ("Drain 'em and fill 'em!")

Hopp emerged from the station with two bottles of cherry coke and a

two-pound sack of sunflower seeds, which he propped between them on the armrest. He hesitated, then tossed the keys into Jonathan's lap as well. "Your turn," he said, and scooted over to the passengers' seat instead. The kid probably wanted as much time behind the wheel as possible before he'd be forced to relinquish his cherished ride.

Jonathan opened his mouth to protest, thought better of it, and nodded, a fleeting expression of love on his face as he turned the engine over, felt the wheel hum under his fingertips. Hopp considered- if he got that Christmas bonus, he could probably scrape together enough cash to procure a second clunker for the Byers family and reunite the teen with his beloved vehicle...

Something to keep in mind. Hopp took a sip of soda, munched a handful of seeds, cranked his seat back as far as it would go, and closed his eyes.

He didn't wake until the late afternoon sun beating down on his face produced quite the headache, and he groaned, stiff as a board, as he stretched and wiped a line of drool from his face. Jonathan had switched his stereo on, but kept it quiet: the Clash questioned whether Hopp would stay, or would he go? The recollection of the last time he'd heard that song gave him a chill.

"We passed Chicago an hour ago," Jonathan said, not looking at him. "And we just made it past the Indiana border."

"Mm." Hopper nodded. They'd called and scheduled a room in an Ohio motel- it was cheaper than staying overnight in Pennsylvania- but it looked like reaching it would be a while yet. He sat up, rubbed his eyes with his hands. Still not looking at him, Jonathan reached into a bag between his feet and thrust a water bottle at him. "You're dehydrated," he said.

"And you know this... how?" Hopper questioned, cracking the bottle open and taking a swig. It was lukewarm.

Jonathan snorted. "I took basic health class, that's how. All you ever drink is soda and coffee. And booze. It dehydrates you. That's why you get headaches."

If Hopper had wanted to be lectured on his bad health practices, he'd have gone on a multi-state drive with Florence. "You sound like an old lady."

"You sound like a guy who'll have a heart attack by age fifty."

Hopper resisted the fleeting but strong urge to flip the kid off. The fuck did he know about jack-shit anyway? Snout-nosed brat who'd never been out of the damn landlocked state but once or twice in his life. "That 'basic health class' teach you about fucking old men, too?"

He froze the second the question left his mouth and, swearing loudly, Jonathan's hands slipped on the wheel. There was a heartshuddering moment where they careened on the road, nearly cantered into the next highway lane, and the loud blatting of a horn behind them seemed to pierce straight into their chests before Jonathan again regained control.

"Oh, so now you bring it up?!" Jonathan demanded, face red. "Months later? Now is when you want to talk about it?! Fine, Hopp, what have you got to say?"

Hopp hadn't meant to bring it up at all. He'd have been quite fine with never bringing it up in their lifetimes, if at all possible; hope it got buried by time and memories that just weren't as good as they used to be. But the thin veneer that had coated the unpalatable event had been unzipped and all came spilling out now.

"Not much to say," Hopp shrugged. "We did a pretty fucked up thing and I don't know about you, but it fucked me in the head. Kinda fucked my life up, but sure, it's not like I'm not used to pretending everything's fine when it sure as fuck isn't."

"Say 'fucked' a few more times, why don't you?" Jonathan suggested, laughing bitterly. His knuckles were white on the wheel from how tight he gripped it. "You think it doesn't make me sick every time I remember it? I tried to kiss a girl at graduation and about puked down her gown."

"Great. What do you want me to say to that? You came to me when I was high, you threw the punches, you-"

"Oh, it's my fault?!"

"Well it sure as fuck ain't mine!"

And oh, how Hopper wished he believed himself on that one. It was his fault by virtue of him being the adult, the one who was supposed to know better. He'd been weak- he was weak; he'd always been weak after a lifetime of giving into indulgences, and Jonathan had been the perfect object upon which to cut himself open just that little bit more when life was going too well for comfort.

"You're a s-sick bastard, Hopper," Jonathan mumbled, shoulders slumped low, Kubrik stare focused only on the road ahead. And then words black and foul as bile bubbled out of Hopp's lips without a second thought:

"Yeah? At least I don't call my old man's name out when I jizz myself."

For a moment, Hopper wondered if Jonathan really would get into a car accident. He went incredibly still behind the wheel, eyes fever-bright, mouth pressed into a fine, thin line. His color became quite chalky and pallid. His breath came in tiny, short gasps. "I didn't think you'd heard that."

"Kinda hard to miss."

They drove in silence broken only by the Clash's disproportionately cheery tune and bleak lyrics:

"Straight to hell, boy; go straight to hell, boy."

They were going to need to fuel up on gas again, soon; probably think about grabbing a bite for dinner. It was almost unthinkable that they would still be hungry after clearing the air with such words, but it was true. Hopper was about to open his mouth and make the suggestion before Jonathan interrupted him, voice much quieter than before.

"Lonnie never touched me or Will. Or did anything like that. If that's what you were thinking."

Hopper had sort of been wondering that, actually, but he wasn't going to ask. "Oh?"

"No. He's a piece of shit but not-- not in that way."

"Okay."

"So Will shouldn't turn out like me, I'm sure. I'm sure he'll be normal. I'm just a... you know. I just turned out weird because something in my head's weird. He'll be fine."

"Jonathan..." Hopper was not a therapist. Hell, he'd never even finished his own recommended therapy after Sara... well. It wasn't that he didn't believe in it; he knew it helped countless people every year. Maybe it was just that he believed that he, himself, did not deserve it. "I don't think you're a... a creep, or a freak, or whatever you keep calling yourself. I just think you're... I think life beat you up more than it beats up the average kid, and you've taken some battle scars. I think you could get help, if you wanted to."

Jonathan quieted for several more miles. The exit that Hopper had thought he should take came and went. The cassette turned over a new track, and then did so once again. Soon they'd be out of Clash altogether. Then-

"What if I don't want to get help?"

Oh, the honesty of youth. "Then you'll be like me, I think."

"Oh."

They drove on. The sky was beginning to darken when they passed the Ohio state sign and, unprompted, Jonathan pulled over into a small gas station-slash-burger diner, standing and stretching until it seemed as though all the muscles in his skeleton popped. Hopper stood too, doing squats and trunk rotations until the numbness in his legs stopped tingling. They were fairly close to the motel they'd plotted out on their map.

Business was slow in the diner when the frizzy haired waitress lead them to a shiny booth. "Coffee?" she asked, and Hopper accepted, then- at Jonathan's stern glance, requested a glass of water in

addition to his drink of choice.

The silence between them as they ate was, shockingly, not as uncomfortable as it could have been. Hopper tried changing the subject, questioning Jonathan about whether he was excited for his university classes, whether he knew who his roommates would be yet, but in no time they'd lapsed into their own thoughts once more. There was a quality of heaviness to the impending evening glow. If Hopper didn't think too much about it, he could pretend it wasn't there, despite the growing, animal stink of sex in the air.

It buzzed, though, quiet between them as they checked into the motel, making sure to save the receipt of payment with that of their diner and gas bills for proper budgeting- Joyce was trying to get Hopper better in the habit of keeping track of his finances; for her own mental wellbeing, if nothing else. They took their room key and walked together across the outside motel grounds under dense fir trees and, if Jonathan was pressing slightly closer to Hopp than he needed to, neither commented on it.

"I'm taking a shower," he announced, after a brief survey of their plain room with its two queen-sized beds, and threw himself into the bathroom, trying very hard not to think at all. He could hear the television's static on the other side of the door, and it calmed him. The one thought that snuck through the cracks of his heavily maintained mental fortress was this: You're really letting it happen again?

Jonathan was waiting for him when he stepped out of the now steam-filled bathroom. Hopper wished he could have been more surprised when Jonathan stepped into his space, wound long, strong arms around his damp, bare neck, and kissed him on the lips.

He broke the kiss only to ask- "You gonna freak out and storm away again? Might make it kinda awkward-" before Jonathan was shutting him up with tongue and teeth and hands efficiently pulling at his towel, licking over him.

Cheating on his steady girlfriend with her son was not something Hopper was proud of. But it was so incredibly easy not to think of it in such terms when he had a warm handful of boy all over him, still

musky from the road; when he didn't have to worry about being gentle as he threw him down on one of the beds and crawled over him, wrenching handfuls of hair and burying his teeth into arched, yielding throat.

"Say my name," he demanded of Jonathan, ridding him of his shirt and leaving purpled bites over his chest, thumbing his nipples the way he'd seen Jonathan do to himself. The breathy sounds this elicited, the way it made him arch needily, were gorgeous to behold. "Say my name, Jonathan; not his."

"Hopp-" Jonathan cried, hips bucking. "J-Jimmy. Jimmy, please..."

Hopper wrenched the boy's hair again, growling like a rabid bear, wanting to be all over the boy; wanting to mark him with his teeth and his scent, wanting to pull him apart and see for himself the tangled wires that made up his bizarre computer-brain. "Look at me while I jerk you off, kid," he ordered. "Look into my eyes. Don't you fuckin' think for a second that it's someone else doing this to you."

The jealousy in his voice caused a small smile to cross the boy's swollen lips, even as he rocked into the callous-rough hand that gripped him, slicked him along Hopp's own dick. "You're the only one here. It's just you, Jimmy."

"You're goddamn right."

He pressed the ball of his thumb to Jonathan's puckered hole, circling it, feeling it pulse and clench around him. Once again, they'd forgotten the lube. His balls ached in frustration, wanting to pound him, use him like a doll until he curled up and whined and wept for it, nails clawing Hopp's back to ribbons-- but they'd have to do with this little slice of not-enough, never-enough they were allotted. In the breathless hour, they rendered one another stark as the feral, raw beasts they were underneath skin and propriety.

"You gonna be fucking your professors like this?" he huffed, mouth flush against Jonathan's sweat-dampened scalp, his hips rutting into any part of Jonathan he could reach. "Let them do this to you?"

"Why?" Jonathan laughed, struggling to get the upper hand, to sit up.



"Would it bother you if I did, Jimmy?"

His smile was shark-like when this made Hopper's hand convulsively cinch around his waist. He pried it loose, then brought it around his throat, spreading his legs wider to accommodate Hopp's flared hips slotting between them. His legs encircled Hopp's waist, crossing his ankles at the small of his back. "You're just as fucked up as I am. You're just like me."

"Promise me you won't." Hopper added a twist to his wrist as he jerked them both off, creamy pre-cum filling his palm, overflowing between his fingers like he was squeezing a ripe fruit. "Promise me. Fuck other students if you have to but. You'll-- Not like this. I-" he didn't quite know what he was asking for, but his blue eyes met Jonathan's brown ones in the dimness of their motel room, the flimsy headboard hitting the wall with every other powerful roll of hips.

"I promise I'll only use you when I need to be fucked up in the head," Jonathan confirmed, and with a growl, Hopper came in hot, sticky ropes of white all over his flat, tanned belly.

Despite his earlier warning, he half-expected Jonathan to run for the car, to sleep out there anyway as post-coital anxieties and regret overcame them. He didn't, though, shocking Hopper by instead rolling over in his arms, until his back was to Hopper's chest. It was nothing like holding Joyce; there was no softness, no give. She was tiny in his arms while Jonathan was big; bony; all wrists and ankles and pointed boy elbows. He pressed a palm to Jonathan's chest and, in his sleepy state, was almost startled when he felt no breasts to hold.

"Promise me, too," Jonathan murmured, when they'd both caught their breaths, when Jonathan managed to stop shivering all over. "Nobody else. You won't cheat on her with anyone else."

"You really think you have the right to ask me that?" Hopper scoffed, deliberately echoing the words Jonathan had spoken to him last time. Then, when he felt Jonathan's frown against his wrist, amended-"Obviously. There is nobody else. If I break her heart, you'll be half responsible."

It wasn't great. It was actually the most messed-up deal he'd ever made in his life. Yet it was also the most sincere. They would use each other to get their fix of self-destruction; perhaps it'd be easier to contain that way.

"Take care of her and Will while I'm gone."

"Of course."

"Try and take care of yourself, too. I meant it about that heart-attack thing. You're no good to her dead."

"Now you're pushing it, kid."

"I can always try to bone my fine arts professor instead... How much do you wanna bet he'd tell me to call him 'daddy'?"

"Don't blackmail me, Byers."

Maybe this was all some grand delusion- an alcoholic telling themselves they were on their final drink; a junkie insisting he didn't need the needle. I am in control, I swear, they tell themselves, time and time again. There was something a little intoxicating about slipping from one cum-stained bed and moving to the fresh one, his hands around Jonathan's waist as he maneuvered them under the blankets and tucked his mussed head under his chin. It felt a little like the bear inside him growling, claiming: Mine, mine, mine. How selfish could one man be?

He slept easily, and they woke much later than intended. The remainder of their drive to the crowded NYU campus was done in sleepy introspection.

Hopp perked up as they found Jonathan's dorm; a crowded, boxy, off-campus little house filled with bustling and artistic-looking young people; girls with cropped blue hair and nose rings; guys who looked either half asleep or stoned out of their minds. They wore paint-splattered jeans and inky smocks. Jonathan looked around in absolute wonder. Hopper couldn't help but to feel a bittersweet sense of happiness for him.

He helped him bring his things inside and up the rickety stairs to a

room containing two twin beds, one already occupied by a pudgy, freckle-faced kid named Donahue something-or-other and, as Jonathan shyly introduced himself, Hopper crawled along, plugging in lamps, throwing bedding onto the bare mattress, setting up Jonathan's beloved stereo.

There was a tiny table at the foot of the bed and it was there Hopper dumped a heavy cardboard box, which drew Jonathan's attention. "What's that?" he asked, coming close.

"Present from your mom and me." Hopper tried to contain his smile as Jonathan peeked inside, then brightened at what he saw. "A typewriter?!"

"Yeah. Second-hand, but we figured you're a college kid now. You'll have too much shit to write to do it all by hand. Here, let me show you how to load the carbon strip..."

Before long, Hopper had ran out of things to help with. He knew it was time to go, head back to that motel they'd stayed the night before, and then complete the journey home to his girlfriend and her son. He waited until Donahue exited the room before stuffing a crumpled \$50 into the kid's hand. "Get a bus pass. Some groceries and shit. You think you're gonna be okay, kid?"

Jonathan looked overwhelmed; nervous, but happy. Hopper had a good feeling in his gut that the kid was going to absolutely thrive here, surrounded by other artists and out of the confines of small-town suffocation. "My knees are shaking a little," Jonathan admitted with a laugh. "I feel like I'm about to piss myself."

"Good. Means you're still alive." He clapped Jonathan hard on the shoulder, and the bittersweet feeling intensified. "Be good, kid. Actually write those letters like you promised. Will and your mother need 'em."

"Of course."

Hopper headed for the door, but was stopped by a hand gently taking his wrist, pulling him back. Jonathan pulled him close, kissing him more gently than he ever had before. Hopper forgot all about why it

was a bad idea to be kissing what might someday become his stepson in this dorm of college students, protests fizzling away in his brain as only a raw ache was left behind. His hands cupped Jonathan's jaw, chasing his lips, kiss after kiss until his head became swimmy and liquid.

"I trust you," Jonathan whispered, looking at him through his heavily-lashed dark eyes. "I trust you to watch over my family."

"With my life," Hopper agreed, tongue feeling thick and slow in his mouth. He wanted to lay Jonathan back on the twin-sized bed and absolutely take him apart, taste every inch of him and bring him to the slowest, most burning climax of his life. But now wasn't the time or place for it; their stolen time was up.

"I'll come back for you at Christmas," Hopper promised as he left. "Make us proud, kid."